

Hébert, T. R. (2016). A biographical portrait of Joseph S. Renzulli: Scholar, gifted educator and visionary leader. In S. M. Reis (Ed.), *Reflections on gifted education: Critical works by Joseph S. Renzulli and colleagues* (pp. 99–113). Routledge.

A Biographical Portrait of Joseph S. Renzulli: Scholar, Gifted Educator and Visionary Leader

Thomas P. Hébert
University of South Carolina

Introduction

It was a crisp sunny morning in May, 2008 when I joined Joe Renzulli for a cup of coffee. We were enjoying the Connecticut sunshine and the sounds of birds chirping from the woods surrounding the Renzullis' beautifully landscaped backyard. As we got situated at a table on the back patio, I realized that I was fortunate to have the opportunity to interview my doctoral mentor about his life. I knew the conversation would enable me to capture details of his significant life experiences and his contributions to gifted education. I also realized that I faced a challenge. I knew the humility of this man and realized that such a personal conversation centered on his experiences might be something he would not necessarily enjoy. As we sipped our coffee and began with casual conversation, I arranged my tape recorder on the table and proceeded with the interview. We engaged in that conversation for two hours before it was time for us to hop in Joe's sporty BMW to travel across the state of Connecticut for an important meeting. Following lunch at Rein's Deli, our conversation continued in the car. As Joe drove, I continued the interview with my trusty cassette recorder capturing his reflections. The stories he shared brought us both some great laughs and even a few tears. My memory of that backyard conversation and our ride across Connecticut is one I cherish today.

Several weeks after the interview, Joe's wife Sally provided me with a copy of a family history that had been written for the Renzullis by Joe's beloved Uncle Ferrer. This significant manuscript served me well in writing this chapter. In addition to the family history, I enjoyed the interview with Joe conducted by Dr. Abbey Block Cash and Dr. Stuart Omdal at the 2008 annual meeting of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, 2009) in Tampa, Florida. This videotaped event at the convention was sponsored by the Conceptual Foundations Network as part of the "Portraits in Gifted Education: The Legacy Series." This dedicated network of NAGG educators is committed to documenting and preserving the theories of the most influential scholars in the field of gifted education in order to honor them and their contributions for future generations.

I have merged these three sources of data in compiling this chapter on the life of Dr. Renzulli. My objective in writing this chapter is to describe his significant contributions to gifted and talented education and shed some light on how Dr. Joseph Renzulli's life experiences shaped his thinking and his influential contributions to his field.

Early Family History

The Renzulli family history begins in Castelnuovo, Italy in the province of Puglia, in the region of Apulia. Joe's grandfather Salvatore and grand-mother Angelina Martinelli Renzulli maintained a large farm. Grandfather Renzulli was a devout socialist and became very disenchanted with the rise of fascism. A courageous man, he spoke out against the Mussolini regime and was jailed. His crops were burned and his animals were killed. Eventually he emigrated to the United States. Salvatore and Angelina had eight children and settled in Landisville, New Jersey, a community of approximately 300 people, mostly newly arrived immigrants from Italy. Salvatore had worked in the wine industry in Italy, had acquired a passion for all that was involved in making wine, and dreamed of owning a vineyard. His dream materialized when a farm that included a vineyard became available for sale. The farm included forty acres of land with about ten acres of grapes. With Salvatore Renzulli's hard work and dedication to his family, the vineyard prospered and returned a good profit. In 1918, when Congress passed an amendment to the Constitution that prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, this forced Salvatore and his sons to shift to raising vegetables and poultry. Salvatore Renzulli lived to be 87 after his beloved wife Angelina passed away of a heart attack at the age of 39. In the Renzulli's family story, entitled *La Famiglia*, the family historian, Joe's Uncle Ferrer, described how his grandparents' greatest satisfactions in life were the many friends they made. He wrote: "Friends in all walks of life, from the little to the great. Among them were lawyers, judges, doctors, professionals and paesanos from the old country; all were welcome." He explained the significance of these friendships: "We, their children profited most as we gained a much broader view of life and learned to mingle with all types of people." The family historian also described Salvatore and Angelina's approach to parenting:

Both parents were great readers. We remember them on many evenings sitting by the kerosene lamp that lighted our kitchen reading the daily newspaper, a magazine or book. We were constantly prodded to study and do well in school. From them we developed a desire to improve ourselves, get the best education and do the best to improve life for our children and grandchildren. (Renzulli, 1999, p. 9)

Joe's father, Marx Libero Renzulli, suffered from rheumatic heart disease as a child. As a result he could not work on the family farm. He was employed by the railroad industry and served as a strong union activist. His employment with the railroads took him to Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. He met and married Edith Santagelo, and they had three sons, Marx Jr., Joseph, and Walter. They bought a small home in Atlantic Highlands with a mortgage of \$17.00 a month.

Marx Libero Renzulli died in 1944 at the age of 40. Joe was eight years old. His father had worked for the railroad company for 19 years and nine months. Railroad company policy required 20 years of service before an employee could acquire a pension. Edith Renzulli was left to raise three young sons. The three young Renzulli boys came to know the "welfare lady" quite well. When the welfare lady explained that they would have to give up their home and move into "lovely garden apartments," Joe and his older brother quickly managed to earn bus fare by recycling soda pop bottles and took the bus into the city to investigate the apartments. They were appalled by the housing and the decrepit neighborhood the welfare agency was suggesting. Upon

returning home, they described the horrible conditions, the boarded up windows in many of the buildings, and the derelict characters that lingered in the hallways of the apartments. Edith Renzulli agreed with her young sons that they could not live there. Determined to hold onto the small, modest family home, she cleaned houses for wealthy families in the community in order to provide for her children. There were times when the family experienced the electricity and water being cut off because they could not pay the bills; however, they managed to pay the monthly mortgage of seventeen dollars in order to stay together as a family.

Joe's father's younger brother Ferrar, known as "Uncle Fatty," intervened. He quit his teaching job, and with Mary, his new bride, moved 70 miles to join Edith and her three young sons. He found a new position teaching in Ocean Township and moved in with Joe's family for a year to help them get back on their feet financially. Joe explained, "We might not have made it if it were not for Uncle Fatty. We might have been taken away for adoption." Edith Renzulli, an intelligent woman, had been educated in schools in Italy but spoke no English. Her three young sons became her English teachers. With limited means she raised her three sons to become successful. Joe's older brother Marx earned a doctorate in history and became a successful history professor at Tufts University. Walter, the youngest son, became a barber. Walter suffered from a kidney disease that eventually took his life at age 32.

Childhood on the Jersey Shore

Joe's childhood took place within his community in Oakhurst, New Jersey. He reflected fondly on his first trip outside the state of New Jersey when he was twelve. His school friend Johnny Marcotte's father Joe was a "jack of all trades kind of a guy" who was originally from New Hampshire. All Mr. Marcotte ever talked about were the scenic mountains, rivers, and lakes of his home state. When he was provided an opportunity to transport high quality lumber down from New Hampshire for boat building along the Jersey shore, he invited Joe to join him and his son on several trips to transport the lumber. Joe reminisced, "I'll always remember those trips fondly. I had never been out of New Jersey. I may have gone to Brooklyn, New York a couple times, but that was it. I remember traveling through the beautiful mountains." He reflected, "We stayed in a rather primitive camp and washed up in the nearby brook. It was the first time I saw the world beyond the little area I grew up in. It was a real pleasure."

Joe and his neighborhood buddies spent their days involved in adventures that involved a number of get rich quick schemes. They formed a group called "the Explorers Club," investigating abandoned homes along the Jersey shore. They spent their time searching for creative ways to make some extra money. Several small-scale businesses evolved from one summer to the next. He described one business that proved to be quite profitable:

There were a number of very large estates along the Jersey shore that had been abandoned after the Depression. They had these greenhouses that were broken down. There was one estate where ivy had grown wild and it was covering everything. Behind the greenhouse, my friends and I discovered, were a thousand clay pots and a large overgrown hedge. We got my little wagon, got these clay pots, and filled them with soil. Then we cleaned out an ivy plant and we would cut a stalk out of the hedge. We'd tie the ivy to the stalk in the pots. We'd go around the neighborhood selling these plants. The cost to us was nothing, so that was one of the successful businesses we ran.

During World War II, families were encouraged to produce “victory gardens” in honor of the efforts of the military. The Renzulli family joined this effort, and nine-year-old Joe began a small business selling vegetables in his neighborhood. Joe’s garden was quite small and did not yield what he needed. He found that once it was dark outside, he could “borrow” a few vegetables from other people’s gardens. He built up his little wagon with three tiers of shelves and went door-to-door selling his produce. On Roosevelt Avenue was a stern, portly widow named Mrs. Hutchinson who called the vegetable seller from her front porch, “Boy! Can you come over here?” The young vegetable salesman approached the porch with trepidation. “Those potatoes you sold me several days ago were so good. Can you get me some more?” The young vegetable salesman was relieved that Mrs. Hutchinson didn’t realize she was buying potatoes from her own garden!

As dedicated members of the Explorers Club, Joe and his two brothers discovered an entire basement room in one of the abandoned mansions filled from wall to wall and floor to ceiling with old newspapers. Although his older brother was becoming somewhat of a history buff who reveled in these old newspapers, Joe and his younger brother had another plan. They spent days bundling these papers, piling them onto Joe’s little wagon and selling them to the local “rag man” in the community. To the three young Renzulli boys, this room of old newsprint was a tremendous find, which led to a substantial fortune in the eyes of these young businessmen. Joe explained that adolescent boys growing up along the Jersey shore could always find little summer jobs in the ice cream stands or fast food places on the boardwalk. He pointed out that he and his brothers applied their personal creativity to address their situation: “We didn’t have any money, so you always had to figure, ‘You want something? What can I do to get it?’ I think that’s where my present-day entrepreneurial spirit comes from.”

Joe Renzulli the Student

As a student, Joe Renzulli did well all through school. He earned good grades yet was a “scrappy kid” who got into plenty of schoolyard fights and spent time on the detention bench outside the principal’s office. He explained, “I was considered to be a hell raiser.” School was pretty routine for him until Miss Elise Kent, his seventh and eighth grade language arts teacher, managed to get him directed. He reflected,

I was in trouble once, and she sat me down and said, “I really like your writing.” She got me to start the school newspaper. Eventually she got two or three other kids involved, but in the beginning I was doing all the writing. I had to use two or three pen names. That was a turning point in terms of doing something that I really liked that was a bit more creative. I was a good lesson learner, but that really changed my attitude. When I went to high school, I was on the school newspaper staff and in the press club. Our high school published a series called “Words and Pictures”—artwork and stories written by kids. I had a few pieces published, and I got a tremendous sense of pleasure doing that. I actually had aspirations of being a journalist and writer.

Joe appreciated the significant influence Miss Kent had on his life. His involvement in the school newspaper became an important outlet for him and also helped him work to channel his energy in positive directions. He explained,

I understood that my involvement in the school newspaper would be taken away from me if I continued to get in trouble. We were the only Italian family in the neighborhood, and there were a lot of cracks made about Italians, “Wop! Guinea!” My mother always used to put little vegetables wrapped in waxed paper in our lunches. At lunch, this kid would pass my desk every day and say, “Show me a guinea, and I’ll show you a garden.” After the fifth time he said that, I stood up and pummeled him. I often ended up in trouble—on the detention bench one more time because I started a fight. As a result, I developed a reputation.

Joe had a miserable experience with Miss Vogel, his high school guidance counselor, who recognized that his family came from limited means. As a result, she had directed Joe’s older brother, Marx, to enroll in the non-college track of courses throughout high school. He eventually went on to earn a doctoral degree in history from the University of Virginia. Joe was determined to pursue a college preparatory track. As a result of his success as a writer in junior and senior high school, he had aspirations of becoming a journalist and eventually “writing the great American novel.” Years later the teachers who had sent Joe Renzulli to spend time on the detention bench were rather shocked when they heard that he was going to become a teacher.

During his senior year at Asbury Park High School, he took the city bus and went to his “College Night” at the high school. He knew that his family could not afford to send him to school. He reflected on the experience of that evening:

I’ll never forget that night. You went from room to room, and you got the pitch about each school and all the paperwork. You asked about scholarships. The only scholarships were for athletics. While I was on the high school football team, I wasn’t scholarship material. I can remember, I got back on the bus to go home that evening, and I was literally in tears. At that time we were at war with Korea, the draft was on. So many young men simply worked construction and waited to be drafted. We had an expression for anybody not going to college: “You have a career in Korea.”

Shortly after that “College Night” experience, Joe’s Uncle Fatty interceded once again. Uncle Fatty had earned a degree from Glassboro State Normal School. He assured his nephew, “Teaching has been good to me.” He worked his way up through the ranks and had developed an adult education program for returning veterans. He had attended Glassboro with a woman named Grace Bagg, who was then serving as director of admissions and scholarships at what had become Glassboro State Teachers College. With strong SAT scores and good grades, Joe believed that he could gain admission, but he simply needed funding. When Uncle Fatty checked with Grace Bagg on the possibilities of financial aid, she was able to provide a tuition scholarship and a small work-study job. Uncle Fatty also found him a job pumping gas in a gas station on weekends and a 1946 four-door Dodge to commute back and forth to the gas station. When a new grocery store opened up in his neighborhood, he got a job stocking shelves at night. With his extra jobs Joe was able to cover his room and board and living expenses. Living in an apartment house with other college students, he often negotiated loans from Vin Damski, the apartment house moneylender. Joe explained, “He’d give you 15 dollars and in two weeks you owed him 20.”

During the summer months, Joe worked in an ice house in Ocean City, New Jersey, seven days a week for 12 hours a day, often earning overtime money for even longer days. With a promotion to foreman of the landing dock at the icehouse, he was able to help his mother financially and pay his car insurance policy. The summers spent working at the icehouse were memorable. Joe pointed out that Ocean City, New Jersey was a great place for young adults to be in the summer. Thousands of young women arrived every summer to work as waitresses. The area was known for great nightclubs and bands and several summer romances resulted in weddings. Joe noted, “We had great times. We worked hard, but it was a fun time.”

Early Teaching Career

Joe Renzulli graduated from Glassboro State Teachers College in 1958 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in science education with a minor in math education. His first year of teaching was in Ocean Township, New Jersey in a sixth grade self-contained classroom. His beginning salary was \$3,600.00. Following that year, he taught seventh and eighth grade mathematics and science. During his early career years as a teacher, he continued his work at the ice house in Ocean City, as he indicated, “I made as much in one week at the ice house as I did in two weeks teaching.”

Joe taught math and science in junior high school for six years. During that time, the Russians had launched Sputnik, and Americans were concerned that we were losing our competitive edge. American schools responded by paying more attention to the teaching of math and science, particularly with gifted students. Edward German, the superintendent of schools in Joe’s school district, approached him with an offer. He asked Joe to begin a science program for highly able learners. He paid him an extra \$300.00 in salary. When Joe requested a curriculum from the superintendent, he replied, “There isn’t one.” Years later Joe reflected, “That was the best thing that could have happened. Had there been one—science for the gifted—I would have taught it.”

Instead he incorporated guest speakers from nearby science and industry labs in New Jersey. He infused more investigatory experiences and provided opportunities for the students to pursue their own self-selected areas of interest. This science program undoubtedly served as the early field test for what would later become Renzulli’s Enrichment Triad Model.

During his first year of teaching Joe enrolled in a master’s degree program in school psychology at Rutgers University. As a full-time teacher, he enrolled in evening classes and summer and weekend courses. Psychology intrigued him, and he had no desire to pursue the traditional route to upward mobility through a degree in educational administration. During the 1960s, men in education were destined to become building principals, but Joe had a different view. He explained,

All the men then had aspirations of becoming administrators because that was the only upwardly mobile path to financial advancement at that time and few women were doing that. I never had any fondness for administration. Going to meetings and pushing paper across the desk did not appeal to me. I really loved the psychology courses I had taken as an undergraduate, and I especially loved the tests and measurement courses.

The Rutgers school psychology program required a practicum experience, and Joe was fortunate to have Bob McKee, a school psychologist, in the junior high school where he was teaching. As part of Joe's training in individual intelligence testing and personality testing, McKee agreed to supervise him. Joe spent many hours testing students and made thoughtful observations of what he was seeing in children during those sessions. He became intrigued with the students like those in his science and math classes, who had a much more conceptual and insightful understanding. Those experiences testing young adolescents and working with highly intelligent seventh and eighth grade students proved to be significant. He indicated, "I had kids in science asking me questions I couldn't answer. That was very intimidating but a very good experience for anyone training to be a doctoral advisor." He enjoyed his work in school psychology and appreciated the strong background he acquired in tests and measurements.

During his time at Rutgers, one of his personality assessment teachers, Jane Beasley Rath, handed him a manuscript to review and provide her with "talking points." He was happy to take on the extra challenge. The manuscript was the earliest version of the Getzels and Jackson (1962) text on creativity and intelligence that would later become the seminal contribution entitled *Creativity and Intelligence*. He began reading it one evening and later reported, "The sun was coming up when I finished it, and I was hooked!" Fascinated with the notion of creativity, he eventually switched his major to educational psychology so he could enroll in courses such as theories of learning, conceptual foundations of thought, and theoretical psychology. He completed the school psychology coursework to become certified as an examiner, and never regretted the work he did in this field since he acquired a good perspective on assessment and would later apply those skills in other professional venues. He graduated from Rutgers University in 1962 with a master's degree in educational psychology.

Doctoral Program at the University of Virginia

Jane Beasley Rath had been a graduate student under Abe Tannenbaum, Miriam Goldberg and A. Harry Passow at Columbia University, significant leaders in gifted education. When he expressed interest in gifted students, she provided Joe with several published manuscripts by Virgil Ward of the University of Virginia. Joe found Ward's work impressive. His older brother Marx was in graduate school in Charlottesville, so Joe decided to travel there for a visit. While in Charlottesville, he made an appointment to meet with Dr. Ward at the University of Virginia. He was able to arrange for Joe to receive a graduate assistantship in special education in order to pursue his doctoral studies. He studied under Virgil Ward for three years and graduated with his doctoral degree in educational psychology in 1966. His dissertation, entitled "Diagnostic and Evaluative Scales for Differential Education of the Gifted," involved developing a paradigm for evaluating programs for the gifted. It was later published and became the leading resource on program evaluation in gifted education.

His relationship with his doctoral mentor had a powerful influence on him as a scholar. He described Dr. Ward as "tough" and "a man of unbelievably high standards." Ward demanded precision in thinking and writing. "Split an infinitive and you would hear about it six times. Later he'd hand you a paper, and he'd say, 'I see you didn't split any infinitives.'" Joe described his intellectual discipline:

I'd arrive in the office and say "Good morning." And Virgil would respond with "Mr. Renzulli, what do you mean by good? And what do you mean by morning?" You had to defend everything, and you had to defend it logically. You couldn't just say, "Research says ..." He'd say, "What does that research say? And where did they get their data?" He'd ask all the tough questions. But he taught me how to think, and he taught me how to write. My writing improved 300 fold, but my early papers for him were bloody with red ink when he returned them.

Joe indicated that he enjoyed strong intellectual debates with his mentor until the day he died. Dr. Ward was a strong conservative who believed that "the measure of a man was his IQ." He remained committed to high-IQ cut-off scores for entry into gifted education programs, while Joe challenged conventional wisdom and opened up gifted education programs to many more children. Joe reflected, "Virgil and I were on opposite points of the compass in our views of what makes giftedness, but as far as I was concerned, his mentoring was the kind of discipline I needed."

Early Career Years at the University of Connecticut

Following graduation from the University of Virginia, Joe interviewed in several prestigious universities for positions in educational psychology programs. These interviews provided him with the first opportunity in his life to travel on a plane. At that time, the Renzulli family knew that Joe's younger brother Walter did not have much longer to live as he battled the kidney disease that eventually took his life. During that period, Joe wanted to live closer to his family and was interested in schools that would enable him to travel home to New Jersey within a few hours. The University of Connecticut was only three hours from home. When the opportunity to join the faculty at the University of Connecticut was offered in 1966, Joe was delighted to accept the offer and has remained on the faculty at UConn since.

Initially he was intrigued with research that was being conducted by Ellis Paige, who had received a substantial federal research grant to explore the scoring of children's written essays by computer. Project Essay Grading (PEG) took on the challenge of scoring the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (ITCT). Joe joined Paige in this work, and together they developed an understanding of the creative thinking skills that could be developed through curricular activities, which led to the publication of *New Directions in Creativity*, a series of five volumes of creativity training activities for elementary and middle school students.

When the state of Connecticut passed legislation in 1967 that helped fund gifted education programs at a level equal to special education funding, there was suddenly a need for teachers to be trained in gifted education. Joe approached his dean to teach a graduate course in gifted education. The dean was supportive; however, he would have to teach the course as an overload, as the dean could not pay him anything extra. Within a short time, Joe was teaching an auditorium size class: Introduction to Gifted Education. He went on to design courses in creativity and program and curriculum development for gifted students. Randy Nelson, a faculty member in counseling and a student of Marshall Sanborn, joined him and taught courses in counseling gifted students. Eventually Joe was joined by Vincent Rogers, who became an official faculty member in the gifted education program teaching curriculum courses that were philosophically compatible with gifted education.

Major Contributions to His Field

Today Joseph Renzulli is the Neag Professor of Gifted Education and Talent Development at the University of Connecticut where he also served as the director of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT). His 40-year career in higher education has focused on the identification and development of creativity and giftedness in young people and the use of gifted education pedagogy to increase engagement and achievement in all children. An internationally renowned scholar, he is considered by many to be the world's leading expert in this area. His books and articles have been translated into over 15 languages, and he has lectured in approximately 30 countries.

One highlight of his career is the article he wrote in 1978 entitled, "What Makes Giftedness: Reexamining a Definition," and published in *Phi Delta Kappan*. Prior to its appearance in the *Kappan*, this manuscript had been rejected by every major journal in the field of gifted education. According to the Social Science Citation Index, it is still the most frequently cited publication in the field. In this article, Joe presented his Three Ring Conception of Giftedness, the foundation of a more flexible approach to identifying and developing gifted behaviors or high levels of potential in young people. Prior to Joe's work on this definition, most professional educators equated giftedness strictly with high IQ scores. Renzulli's definition challenged this antiquated approach and enabled gifted education programs to be open to children of poverty, children from bilingual backgrounds, and children of color.

Joe Renzulli has worked on the development of organizational models and curricular strategies for differentiated learning environments that contribute to total school improvement. His Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli, 1977) was one of the first efforts on problem-based learning and has been recognized as the most widely used approach for special programs for the gifted and talented. The Enrichment Triad Model served as the foundation for what later became the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1997), which he developed with Dr. Sally Reis. This programming model has been credited as the most widely used approach by schools throughout the world that serve gifted and talented students and seek to enrich and engage all students in enrichment opportunities that are both interest-based and intellectually challenging.

In addition to the development of programming models in gifted education, Dr. Renzulli has engaged in work to support the efforts of educators interested in designing effective curricula. Renzulli created the Multiple Menu Model (Renzulli, Leppien, & Hays, 2000) to help curriculum writers use the information on how knowledge develops to design interesting, rigorous, and authentic units of instruction. His design of the Multiple Menu Model for developing differentiated curriculum provided a management plan that enables curriculum developers to select content and strategies from a number of options or "menus" that are driven by theories of knowledge, curricular design, and instruction. He also joined colleagues in the field in the development of the Parallel Curriculum Model (Tomlinson et al., 2009), an instructional framework for developing the abilities of all students and extending those of students who perform at advanced levels. Through this model Renzulli and his colleagues promote educational equity and excellence by ensuring that all students are appropriately challenged and supported through high quality curriculum.

In the later years of his career, Joe Renzulli has turned his attention again to his three-ring conception of giftedness and has begun to examine what causes some individuals to mobilize their interpersonal, political, ethical, and moral senses in ways that they place human concerns and the common good above all else. He proposed the Houndstooth Theory of Social Capital (Renzulli & Reis, 2003). In this theory, the word *houndstooth* refers to the background pattern of interwoven factors that influence gifted behaviors. Renzulli and Reis (2003) defined social capital as “a set of intangible assets that address the collective needs and problems of other individuals and communities at large” (p. 77). In pursuing research on the houndstooth factors that influence the development of social capital, Renzulli looks to expand the definition of giftedness to include several traits that characterize individuals who have a profound impact on the improvement of society.

In his 40-year career in education, Joseph Renzulli has contributed hundreds of books, book chapters, articles, and monographs to the professional literature. He has also generated millions of dollars in research and training grants. However, he maintains that his proudest professional accomplishment is the Confratute Program, a training institute on enriched teaching and learning held every summer at the University of Connecticut. Renzulli founded Confratute in 1978, and it has served more than 30,000 teachers and administrators from around the world, exposing them to enrichment and engagement for all children.

Joe Renzulli’s professional awards and honors are extensive. The following are provided as significant highlights of his numerous achievements. Dr. Renzulli was named a board of trustees distinguished professor at the University of Connecticut in 2000, an honor limited to only three professors each year. He has served on numerous editorial boards in the fields of gifted education, educational psychology and research, and law and education. He has also served as a senior research associate for the White House Task Force on Education of the Gifted and Talented. Dr. Renzulli is a fellow in the American Psychological Association and has received numerous distinguished research awards from the National Association for Gifted Children and the University of Connecticut. He was awarded an honorary doctor of law degree from McGill University in Montreal, Canada in 2003 and the 2009 Harold W. McGraw, Jr. Prize for Innovation in Education.

His Greatest Joys With His UConn Family

As professor emeritus in the College of Education, Joe Renzulli’s love of family is evident in his pride for the family of graduate students who have graduated from the gifted education and talent development program at the University of Connecticut. In explaining his approach to a successful program of mentoring graduate students, he reflected,

The kinds of selections we made in getting people to the program made a difference. There are a variety of strengths among the doctoral students—some are prolific, others are more political, and others have been phenomenal teachers. What they see happens here in practice is what makes a good scholar—there is an appreciation or different styles.

Joe pointed out that when doctoral students graduated from the program he made a point to hold an individual conversation with each student. His overarching question during that conversation was: “What are some of the things you learned here that have absolutely nothing to do with courses and content?” He indicated that some were initially taken aback, however:

They get around to what I consider to be important values—appreciating differences in other people, that secretaries are as valuable members of the team as anybody else, respect for the fact that people are going to bring their own agendas to the table in scholarship. Everybody is different in his or her beliefs about things, and you have to respect that. That to me is what has contributed to the success. I am who I am, and I live that. I try to be kind to others. And of course, having something like Confratute when we come to be back together is kind of glue that holds us together.

In discussing his greatest professional joys, he reported, “I love seeing the successful work of kids using stuff that I’ve developed. All of those Type III studies that children have pursued over the years. It verifies the fact that these are the kinds of things that change kids lives.” He also highlighted how Confratute: The Summer Institute on Enrichment Teaching and Learning at the University of Connecticut every year is one of his proudest achievements. He noted: “It’s something that brings people together under optimal conditions. When you reach 100 teachers, you reach a 1,000 kids.”

Joe is also proud of his graduate students and their professional accomplishments. “It’s nice to open up one of the gifted journals and of the seven articles, two or three are UConn graduates.” He pointed out that several presidents of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and editors of leading journals in the field were his former students. He is also proud of others who, as administrators and state department consultants, have contributed to bringing about significant changes in gifted education in school districts throughout the country. He also noted that the international interest in the work from the University of Connecticut has been rewarding. “It’s very satisfying to see other countries wanting what we have because of our focus on creative productivity. It verifies the fact that we are doing something worthwhile.”

Summary

Today Joe Renzulli continues to thrive in his work as the Neag Professor of Gifted Education. His creative productivity continues at a pace that would overwhelm most. His days are spent collaborating with his most trusted colleague and wife, Dr. Sally Reis, and together they celebrate a life filled with joyful days centered around their four beautiful children, Mark, Scott, Sara, and Liza and their two grandchildren, Samantha and Alexander. Today their work and travels take them to many corners of the globe, yet they are always happy to return to their seaside home in Mystic, Connecticut.

References

- Getzels, J. W., & Jackson, P. W. (1962). *Creativity and intelligence: Explorations with gifted students*. New York: John Wiley.
- Hébert, T. P. (2008, May). *Interview with Joseph S. Renzulli*. Mansfield Center, CT.

- National Association for Gifted Children. (2009). *Portraits in gifted education: The legacy series—A conversation with Joe Renzulli*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Renzulli, B. F. (1999). *La Famiglia*. Unpublished family manuscript.
- Renzulli, J. S. (1977). *The Enrichment Triad Model: A guide for developing defensible programs for the gifted and talented*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Renzulli, J. S. (1978). What makes giftedness? Re-examining a definition. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 60(3), 180–184, 261. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20299281>
- Renzulli, J. S., Leppien, J. H., & Hays, T. S. (2000). *The multiple menu model: A practical guide for developing differentiated curriculum*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (1997). *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A how-to guide for educational excellence* (2nd ed.). Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (2003). Conception of giftedness and its relation to the development of social capital. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (3rd ed., pp. 75–87). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Tomlinson, C. A., Kaplan, S. N., Renzulli, J. S., Purcell, J. H., Leppien, J. H., Burns, D. E., Strickland, C. A., & Imbeau, M. (2009). *The parallel curriculum: A multimedia kit for professional development* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.